



Leather Pyrography

Written By: Betz White



TOOLS:

- [Woodburning tool \(1\)](#)
available at craft stores and woodworking shops
(<http://woodcraft.com>, <http://rockler.com>) in a range of types and prices. For under \$20, I bought a basic model with interchangeable tips. Fancier versions with heat regulators can cost upward of \$40. Kits at <http://tandyleatherfactory.com>.



PARTS:

- [Leather item \(1\)](#)
such as a purse or belt; not "pleather"
- [Tracing paper \(1\)](#)
- [Paper \(1\)](#)
to stuff the purse for stability
- [Pin \(1\)](#)
for doing a rough sketch of your design on the leather
- [Leather scraps \(1\)](#)
(<http://brettunsvillage.com>)
- [Leather finish \(1\)](#)
for sealing
- [Design \(1\)](#)
Sketch out a few design ideas on paper, or use my floral motifs.

SUMMARY

When I was in college for fashion design, we were assigned to create a garment using leather and suede. Working with animal skins presents certain challenges — you can't buy

continuous yardage, only hides; ripping out a seam leaves holes; it can't be ironed. I decided to come up with a way to make the plain cowhide a little more exciting as a "fabric."

That's when I had the inspiration to get my hands on a woodburning tool and brand a design into the suede. Woodburning, or pyrography, is the process of drawing on wood by burning lines into its surface with a soldering iron-type tool.

I was recently inspired to try the technique again, this time on a leather bag. By using this tool on leather or suede, you can decorate and personalize anything from belts to wallets to shoes. Swap out different tips to create a variety of detailed lines, or experiment with traditional drawing techniques such as shading, crosshatching, and stippling. You'll be surprised how much detail can be achieved and how addictive this technique can become!

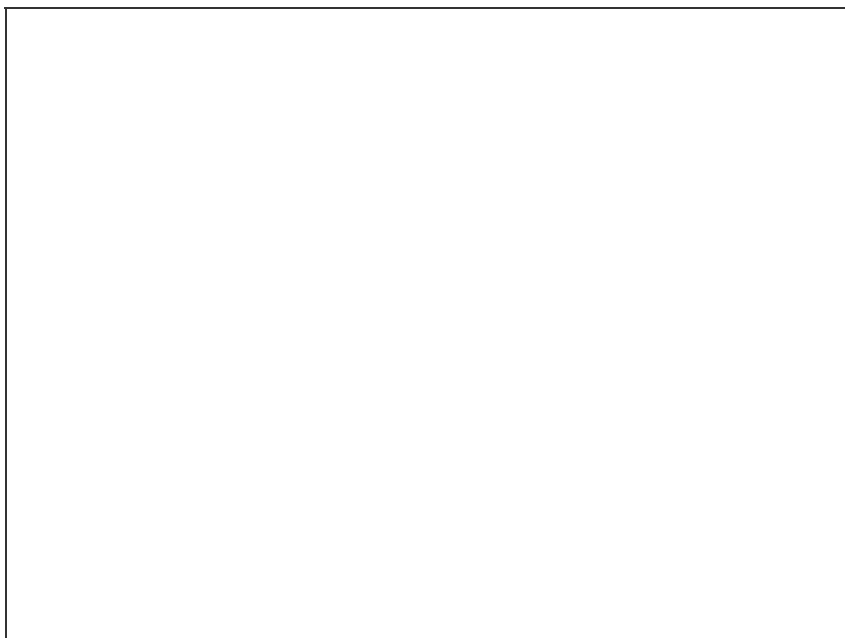
Step 1 — Do some natural selection.



- Select an item, such as a purse or other piece of leather, that you'd like to woodburn. You can pick up something secondhand or use an item you already have.
- Keep in mind that it's best to use vegetable-tanned leather and/or suede with a natural, unfinished surface. Lighter colors produce a higher contrast when burned, allowing for a more visible image.
- The woodburning tool gets very hot. Never leave it unattended; always unplug it if you walk away. Work in a well-ventilated area, and keep a dish with ice water nearby. If you burn yourself, cool your fingers in the water.



Step 2 — Draw inspiration.



- Whether it's doodled line art or shaded dimensional shapes, draw whatever suits your style and the item you'll be woodburning. Fluid, organic forms tend to work best, rather than precise lines and geometrics.
- When you've settled on a design, sketch it onto a piece of tracing paper. Overlay the paper onto your leather to find the best placement of your design.

Step 3 — Plan ahead.



- A dimensional item like a bag or purse should be stuffed with paper or fabric to give you a stable surface to work on.
- Now, roughly sketch your design onto the item. With leather, you can lightly sketch by scratching the surface with a straight pin. If you're working with suede, try using a chalk wheel used for marking on fabric. Making a few indications of your design will help keep you on track once you start burning.

Step 4 — Practice plenty.



- Plug in the woodburning tool and let it heat up. Get a feel for the tool by practicing on some scrap leather or suede. If you don't have any scraps, do a trial on an old pair of leather shoes you're planning to donate to charity.
- Top-grain leather reacts differently than suede leather, and light colors differently than dark. Experiment with an assortment of tips to figure out which is best suited for your design.
- After you've practiced, try out the woodburning tool on your selected item by making a small mark in an inconspicuous area such as a seam allowance or underside of a strap. If you like how it looks, proceed to the next step.

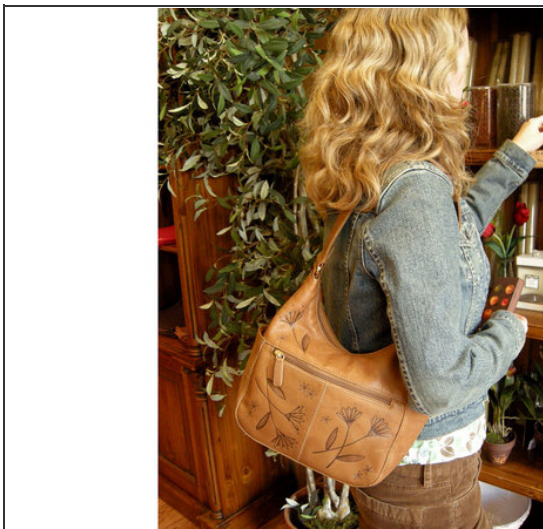


Step 5 — Burn, baby, burn!



- Start out slowly, burning on your basic lines and elements. Gradually build up the line weight and add detail.
- Keep your hand relaxed. Turn your work as needed for ease of drawing, resting the heel of your hand on the item to keep it steady.

Step 6 — Finish and protect.



- When you're happy with the outcome, unplug the tool and admire your work. You can leave your leather project as-is, or protect it with a moisture-resistant finish made for leathers.

This project first appeared in [MAKE Volume 21](#), page 131.

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